

From *Reformasi* to *Political Tsunami*: A Political Narrative of Blog Activism in Malaysia from 1998-2008

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Abstract. The influence of blogs appeared to have had a strong impact on the society especially in the last decade. It was not until the wake of the humiliating defeat of the Barisan Nasional coalition party in the 12th General Election in 2008 that the Abdullah Badawi's administration finally began to open up and engage bloggers and the new media rather than enraging them. Although traditional media still reach far more people than blogs, yet, there are clear evidences that blogs played a significant role in shaping public opinion by publicising issues originally overlooked by the mainstream media, while at the same time offered a new way of democratic participation or cyber activism among political bloggers. Blogs have greatly empowered individuals to politically express themselves to challenge the traditional media as well as the ruling political elites. This paper presents the narratives of political issues, insights and impacts in the Malaysian political blogosphere and points out that the 12th General Election served as the turning point in generating huge awareness for both the state and society on the powers and influences of a blog.

Keywords: Blog, Blogosphere, Cyber Activism, Malaysian Politics, New Media, Participatory Democracy.

1. Introduction

In the age of the Internet and blogs, access to information is no longer restricted to reporters and journalists of a media organisation. New communication technologies, which are widely available, have shattered the old boundaries of traditional media controlled by the ruling elites. On the other hand, political communication is no longer a one-way process – from media to the masses – but it has turned into not only two-way, but multiple ways and levels of communication.

Blogs have greatly democratised the society. Civil societies and young urban professionals, which form the majority of the blogging community have gained tremendous “power” via new communication means to participate in the new online democratic process [1].

Unlike the traditional media, the Internet allows people to directly participate or interact with the information with which they are presented. Consequently, citizens can have 'real-time' conversations with each others, regardless of geographical constraints. In addition, people with similar interests or goals can go to 'virtual' spaces to meet like-minded individuals and discuss issues of interest.

2. Blog as a Medium for Participatory Democracy

Originally, blogs were personal diaries or an online version of a traditional log. The distinct characteristics of blog include blog postings, archived blog entries, hyperlinks and most importantly the independent voice -free from any form of censorship. The term “blogosphere”, on the other hand, refers to the public sphere that existed in the blogging community whereby bloggers and blog readers can freely participate, debate and comment on any issues in blogs.

Prior to the age of blogosphere, if one would like to keep up-to-date to a certain issue or event, one would have to wait until the next news hour on the television or wait for the next day to read it on print media. But today, with the convergence of media and technology, one can get instant updates via Internet blogs. Politically, blogs has changed the way political communication works.

Blogs are now easily to produce by anyone with a computer and Internet access. In the old days of blogging, publishing a blog would require an understanding of FTP and HTML. It was rather time consuming and needed certain technical capabilities. So, it is understandable back then that the pioneers of

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bloggers are those who were literate in computers and Information Technology (IT). Today blogging requires very little technical skill as user-friendly blogging tools are freely available to all. As a result, blogging, which considered an activity once dominated by IT savvy Internet users are now beginning to involve various forms of citizen participation, ranging from corporate professionals, media journalists, senior citizens, university students to political activists.

In understanding the idea of participatory democracy in blogosphere, it is important to understand it from a historical perspective. Participatory democracy or otherwise known as “direct democracy”, in the sense that citizens and civil societies alike play a role in important policies and decisions, was believed to emerge from the youth and student movements of the 1960s in Europe and America [2].

Participatory democracy was especially important in the American New Left, the French and British student movements, the early women's movements, and the anti-nuclear and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Its strength is that it binds individuals to the group through their active involvement in all decisions [2].

The capability for expression increases the participatory nature of democracy in cyberspace while significantly breaking old traditional media hierarchies. In the world of blogosphere today, many of the bloggers are their own writers, editors, publishers and bosses. They set their own rules and agenda on what to write, what to publish, what to censor and so on. Moreover, these individuals play a more direct role in their own governance, through "the power of citizen-to-citizen communications" which benefit both themselves and their community [3].

3. The Early Narratives of Blog Activism

One of Malaysia's most renowned socio-political bloggers, Ahirudin Attan, better known for his blog, *Rocky's Bru*, has divided the development of Malaysia's blogging activity in three different eras: 1) the *Reformasi* years, 2) the era of Jeff Ooi the ‘*sifu*’ of bloggers and 3) the birth and growth of Raja Petra Kamarudin's *Malaysia-Today* [4].

The outbreak of the *Reformasi* Movement in September 1998 caused by the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim has tremendously shaped a major change in the political landscape in Malaysia. Supporters from all over went down to the streets to demonstrate and support the call for *Reformasi*, which was led by Anwar Ibrahim. Massive and unprecedented demonstrations took place in Kuala Lumpur and other major cities. An interesting aspect to note, at the same time, the government of Malaysia is vastly embracing the world of Information Technology. The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) marked a new beginning for Malaysia, as it seeks to be a world leader in Information Technology [5].

With the advancement of the Internet and communication technology and the limitations and restrictions of the print and traditional media in Malaysia, the predominantly anonymous *Reformasi* cyber warriors and sympathisers of Anwar Ibrahim have taken the Internet to be their main platform to disseminate and propagate the cause of *Reformasi*. Hundreds of *Reformasi*, pro-Anwar Ibrahim and anti-government websites mushroomed during that period of time. Some of the notable ones were *Laman Reformasi Mahazalim*, *Mahafiraun*, *Laman Marhaen*, *FreeAnwar.net* and *Malaysiakini*. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's ‘No Censorship Policy’ of the Internet had in a way served as a blessing in disguise for the *Reformasi* cyber warriors to dominate the Internet world [5].

One of the early blogger or rather an online journalist during this period of time was Sabri Zain [6]. He was an active participant of the *Reformasi* demonstration in Kuala Lumpur and was best remembered for his online ‘*Reformasi Diary*’ which was later published into a book, entitled ‘*Face Off*’. Free from any form of media censorship, his online diary records the historical face off between protestors and the riot police backed by water cannon from the day Anwar Ibrahim was sacked right up to the end of 1999. Citizens, especially the pro-Anwar Ibrahim supporters who were hunger for fresh information relied on his online diary and other *Reformasi* websites in order to gain alternative news, something that was not available on the mainstream media due to their alleged bias toward the ruling party.

4. The Second Decade: From Blog to Broadcast to Print

The first Malaysian blog that shot into fame was in September 2004, when Jeff Ooi's blog, *Screenshot*, was featured on the front page of *Berita Harian* [7]. This was the first time ever a blog was featured on a front page of a mainstream newspaper. This was a result of an insulting comment posted by one of his blog commentators, nicknamed 'Anwar' in his blog entry entitled "Islam Hadhari and Money Politics" on September 2004 who commented that "Islam Hadhari and money politics could not be equated with oil and water because oil and water are both sacred. Islam Hadhari and money politics are akin to faeces and urine - that's the way to make a comparison" [7].

The Malay daily accused Jeff Ooi of allowing insulting comment in his blog. This was strongly refuted by the blogger who argued that *Berita Harian* had failed to contact him for his side of story and that he had already warned the blog commentator and subsequently suspended him from his blog a day before *Berita Harian* reported the news on 1 October 2004 [7]. The publicity by *Berita Harian* had indirectly given *Screenshot* an unprecedented free publicity. The public who has never heard of the word blog are now beginning to be familiar with it, though unfortunately came through a negative news report.

Blogs have also been featured widely in newspapers, televisions and other forms of publications. As a direct result of the then "blog phenomena", the government-owned national broadcast station RTM introduced a weekly talk show entitled "*Blog@RTM*", which was aired in RTM1 for several months in 2008. In an unprecedented move, the television program even featured the famous blogger, Raja Petra Kamarudin of the famed "*Malaysia-Today*", known for his staunch anti-establishment views as one of the early panellists for the show. Other prominent guests include veteran journalist, A. Kadir Jasin (kadirjasin.blogspot.com), Raja Petra Kamarudin (Malaysia-Today.net), Nuraina Samad (nursamad.blogspot.com), Ahirudin Attan (rockybru.com.my), former BN Member of Parliament, Ruhanie Ahmad (kuda-kepong.blogspot.com), DAP Member of Parliament, Jeff Ooi (jeffooi.com), former Perlis Mufti, Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin (drmaza.com) and others.

In the context of the local newspaper, the leading Malay daily *Utusan Malaysia* had taken the lead by having a its own blog column, named "*Suara Blog*", or literally translated as "Voice of blogs" which serves as a dedicated column in publishing views and opinions by bloggers on popular topics and issues.

Besides newspaper, some blogs were even compiled and published into books. For instance, Dr. Mahathir's blog, "*CheDet.cc*", was published into a book, entitled "*Chedet.com – Blogging to Unblock*" and Marina Mahathir's book, "*50 Days: Rantings by MM*" which was based on her blog posts throughout the fifty days of her stay accompanying her father, Dr. Mahathir during his coronary bypass at the National Heart Institute (IJN). Another example is A. Kadir Jasin's book, "*Komedi & Tragedi: Politik Mutakhir Malaysia*" which is a compilation of his writings and articles on his blog.

5. The "Political Tsunami" Aftermath: Blog and Online Protest Campaigns

The impact of the 12th general elections in 8 March 2008, widely dubbed as a "*political tsunami*" [8], has seen a significant growth in the number of socio-political blogs, including blogs owned by politicians from across the political spectrum. In the case of Barisan Nasional politicians, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (chedet.cc), Dr. Khir Toyo (drkhir.com), Malacca Menteri Besar Mohd Ali Rustam (mohdalirustam.com) and MCA president, Ong Tee Keat (ongteekeat.net) were among the early ones to setup their blogs as what is seen as a direct consequences of the *Political Tsunami* of the 12th General Elections 2008.

On the other hand, blog led to the Internal Security Act (ISA) detention of Raja Petra Kamarudin for his alleged slanderous postings on the Altantuya murder [9]. Blog forced the police to detain Bakaq also known for his blog, *Penarik Beca*, for his seditious blog image depicting a logo of the Royal Malaysian Police in a despicable manner. Blog led to the arrest of *Kickdefella* or Syed Azidi (Sheih) for his alleged seditious campaign in urging fellow bloggers to fly the Malaysian flag upside down in one of the several protests against the government [10]. While it is evident that nobody is above the law including bloggers; from another perspective, it also shows how influential blog has become.

There had been quite a number of important policies being deferred or being put on hold by the government by justifying it on "public interest". In the blogosphere, bloggers saw it fit to launch an online protest against some of these policies. One of the notable policies was the controversial East-Labu airport,

which former Prime Minister and one of Malaysia's leading blogger Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had strongly protested in his blog [11].

Perhaps in recognising the influence of Dr. Mahathir's blog among the public, Tony Fernandes wasted no time to call for an appointment with Dr Mahathir in order to explain the rationale behind the airport [12]. However, the controversial East-Labu airport project was later cancelled by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak [13]. Regardless of whether the decision made by the government was influenced by the blog campaign was perhaps insignificant, as the more significant aspect was that the outcome of it: which proved that the campaign was successful in its objective that is to urge the government to shelve the project. Several other examples of blog campaigns introduced by bloggers in relating to controversial public policies were the "*Bloggers against IJN takeover*", "*Daulat Tuanku campaign*" and "Anti-PPSMI campaign", to name a few [14].

While it is often perceived by the public that blogs and bloggers are more inclined to support the opposition parties, there are also examples of blog campaigns which, though not directly seen as being pro government, at least it supports the same cause as the ruling party. One example worth mentioning here is the "*Daulat Tuanku campaign*" which was launched in support for the Monarchy in the wake of Pakatan Rakyat's alleged disrespect toward the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Azlan Shah, especially in relating to Karpal Singh's plan to sue the Perak Sultan. This shows that socio-political blogosphere - or at least in the context of elite blogs - no longer operates in a vacuum and their influential role in setting the public agenda cannot be denied or taken down lightly. They can be regarded as the new form of public sphere or some termed is as the "*fifth estate*" [7].

The increasing number of socio-political blogs in the wake of the March 8 political tsunami is a clear and strong testament that the mainstream media no longer hold the sole gateway to political events. Socio-political bloggers, whether pro-Barisan Nasional, pro-Pakatan Rakyat or non-partisan, thinks that they have a role to play and are eager to participate in the political process via cyberspace. They view democracy as not only restricted to voting once every five years, but also the freedom to voice out and express their views independently and thus participating democratically in their own way. It is now no longer a question whether or not blogs have an impact on Malaysian politics, but the question now is to what extent the impact or damage will be.

6. Conclusion

With the advancement of such technologies, the democratisation of the society seems inevitable. Blog has greatly empowered individuals. Blog allows individual to politically express oneself and to participate in the democratic process – in the new context of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in blogosphere – without fear or favour. The impact of the *Political Tsunami* of 2008 had witnessed a great change in how blogs are being perceived and used. Politicians from across both the political spectrum immediately jumped into the blogging bandwagon in an effort to make themselves heard as well as to connect better with the people. It is therefore interesting to see this development continues in the run up to the next general elections.

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